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## WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

### THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF THE THEOLOGIAN'S TASK<sup>1</sup>

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Our subject gains its importance from the fact that the situation confronting the theologian has changed enormously in the last two generations. The whole social order in relation to which he works is being rapidly transformed. The philosophy with which he must keep some sort of adjustment is in transition. There are many new sciences, some of which radically affect his work. And the material in his own proper field has greatly increased. It is small wonder that modern theologians have felt it necessary to re-examine the nature of theology itself. A series of problems has appeared which affects the fundamental nature of the theologian's task, and some worthy solution of these is required before much new constructive work can be done.

This state of things is in itself a ground for hopefulness. It means that the demand for theological work is greater than heretofore, that its opportunity for service is larger, and that, if methods making possible general co-operation can be found, richer results than those of the past may be expected.

But there is some danger that we shall be delayed too long by what Lotze called "the eternal whetting of the sword." For a

<sup>1</sup> A paper read at the first meeting of the Theological Society, New York, October 25, 1912, as a part of a general discussion of this topic.

decade or more the modern theologian—apart from the great productivity in historical fields—has occupied himself chiefly with problems of method and of the relation of theology to other branches of knowledge. Much excellent work has been done, but it is a question whether a mood of irresolution has not fallen upon us. Certainly the systematic theologian is apt to be an object of compassionate sympathy from his historical brethren, of mildly derisive pity from other scientists, and of vigorous exhortations from the active ministry.

If we wish to avoid this danger of whetting the sword too long, perhaps the best way to approach our present subject is to ask what has been already determined in regard to the nature of theology. Modern theology has been in existence for over a century. Surely some results have been obtained which meet with general acceptance among all who are willing to be called modern theologians, and which help to define what theology is. Let us then, at the outset, inquire what these results are.

## I

*Assured results of modern theology in their bearing on the theologian's task.*—These must be stated broadly in order to justify their claim to general assent. At the same time, if they are real results—the work of great men and important movements—they will be capable of furnishing us a fruitful approach to present problems.

First among such assured results may be placed the recognition that theology is relatively distinct from religion, and subordinate to it, and that it has religion as its immediate object.

This principle is one of the debts that the theologian owes to Schleiermacher. It has been long in gaining full acceptance, but it may now be regarded as a necessary presupposition of modern theology. And when consistently applied it has most important consequences. It sets aside, on the one hand, dogmatic theology and scholasticism, and, on the other, natural theology and rationalism. It requires that all dogmas be studied and estimated in their relation to the life of religion as it has manifested itself in history and in personal experience. It demands that, so far as theology seeks support in philosophy, there should be first a mutual recog-

nition of religion as an integral factor in human experience. Vital religion, as it is to be found in the great religious personalities and literatures, as it underlies forms of worship, institutions, and creeds, as it influences character and the movements of society, and as it speaks in the common human heart—this, before all else, is now acknowledged to be the concern of the modern theologian.

There is a second principle which deserves to be counted among the assured results of modern theology. It requires that in investigating religion in general, and Christianity in particular, the historical method be used without limitation or reserve. At this point we are indebted to Hegel, and to the liberal school of theology which was the outgrowth of his influence. But the acceptance of the principle today is not restricted to any one school. The new historical school, the Ritschlians, and the group of theologians who are aiming at a scientific positive theology are practically at one on this point. There may be differences in the consistency with which the principle is applied, but its claim to acceptance is recognized by every theology which is characterized at all by the modern spirit. The historical method is, in fact, the most distinctive mark of modern theology.

Now while the first principle emphasizes religion as a relatively independent, integral factor in human experience, this second principle leads us to search for continuity in the manifestations of religion, and for the interaction between religion and the other sides of human life. And the two principles together lead us to interpret religion as standing in an organic relation—as both means and end—to the rest of experience.

But to these principles, which I have ventured to call assured results of modern theology, there may be added yet a third. This principle is that in Christianity religion and morality are intimately united, and that hence the prime means for the interpretation of Christianity is to be found in its relation to moral and social life. Here we find ourselves under obligation to the Ritschlians, as in the case of the other two points to Schleiermacher, and to Hegel and the liberal school. Not that the Ritschlians discovered the ethical nature of Christianity. That would be by no means true. But their energetic concentration upon this feature of Christianity—

upon freedom, personality, social obligation, and upon sonship and the kingdom of God as essentially ethical conceptions—has practically equipped theology with a new constructive principle. This may be said, too, without passing upon the question whether religion, including Christianity, is in the last analysis mysticism, or something else quite distinct from conduct. For the most strenuous upholder of mysticism will recognize that only the mysticism which steadily bears fruit in the moral and social realm can be called Christian.

I trust that thus far we have not gone beyond what may be called assured results of modern theology. But the fact that these points may hope for general acceptance does not make them unimportant. On the contrary, taken together, they lead to a general conception of theology which we probably all share, and which is, at one and the same time, the source of our problem and our hope for its solution. This conception may be stated thus: *theology is the intellectual interpretation of religion in its development and in its relation to the rest of life; and Christian theology is the intellectual interpretation of Christianity in its development, with prime reference to moral and social life.* Such a general conception as this is doubtless in the background of every modern theologian's mind. It is a broad, and perhaps vague conception, but it is not without constructive force. It has such force primarily because it is unifying. It draws the different branches of theology into very close relation. It has already brought to pass that the exegete, the student of introduction, and the biblical theologian, the Old Testament and the New Testament scholar, and the church historian, all consider themselves to be alike historians of the Jewish-Christian religion. It has brought to pass, further, that the systematic theologian scarcely knows how to distinguish his task from that of the historian of religion. The religion and thought of Jesus and Paul, and, in a lesser degree, of the prophets, or Augustine, or the Reformers, bulk so large in systematic theology that it is hard to distinguish systematic work from historical work. The result is that, for the most part, systematic theology has been led, either to effect a violent or arbitrary separation from historical theology, or else to be content with modernizing traditional theology.

But neither of these alternatives is satisfactory. The modernizing of traditional theology is confessedly a provisional kind of work; and the sharp isolation of a fact of history, like the person of Christ, or of religious truth as such, from the rest of truth, weakens rather than strengthens the theology in which it is made. Hence the problem with which we are confronted is: What is theology in the restricted sense of the term, or what is the function of the systematic theologian?

## II

That solution of this problem will be most effective which stands in closest relation with the generally accepted conception of theology as a whole, of which we have been speaking. But how can this conception furnish us with a solution? The treatment of religion in its development appears to be altogether a historical matter. And we have today two ways of accomplishing it: that of the history of religion proper, which treats of religion in its wholeness, and that of the psychology of religion, which seeks the typical biography of the individual religious soul—or the several types of such biography. Where is there any room, under this general conception, for theology in the special sense? What can systematic theology do, if it wants a real field of its own, in distinction from the history and psychology of religion, except to turn itself into theistic philosophy on the one hand, or practical theology, so called, on the other?

There is, nevertheless, a definite function for systematic theology, which springs directly from our idea of theology in general. Systematic theology is concerned with *the further development of religion*. The history of religion occupies itself with the past only. Its material is spread out before it. That with which it has to do will never change. The psychology of religion also is occupied with the past, and—perhaps it will be claimed—with the present. But it must limit itself to actually existing religion. It cannot go beyond the facts. Systematic theology has to do with the further development of religion, or with religious progress. It is concerned with the point of transition from the present to the future. Its distinctive sphere of operation is the birth and unfolding of religious

life. It exists for the sake of influencing this birth and unfolding. Systematic theology could not maintain itself except as men conceive that religion needs guidance, and that the most thorough interpretation of religion possible should be made to contribute to its guidance.

We may define systematic theology, then, as *the intellectual interpretation of religion with direct reference to its further development, and to the development of life through religion. Christian theology, accordingly, will be the intellectual interpretation of Christianity in its relation to moral and social life for the sake of their mutual further development.*

But if systematic theology be distinguished from the other branches of divinity by its immediate concern with the further development of religion, does it not, on the other hand, become merged with so-called practical theology? In other words, can it avoid becoming subordinate to the church and its creeds and practical programs in such a way as to forego the claim to be a genuine science?

I have thus far avoided speaking of systematic theology as a science, using instead the more general term "intellectual interpretation," because the question whether the methods of science are applicable to this branch of theology is not one of the assured results on which the modern theologian can build. But in distinguishing systematic theology from the practical branches we shall be led to see that the intellectual effort for the further development of religion and Christianity requires the use of the scientific method.

But, first, let us remind ourselves that this question is not due merely to an exigency created by the definitions already proposed. It is rather a product of the general movement of theological thought. Perhaps it has been raised most sharply in recent years by Bernoulli in his book *Die wissenschaftliche und die kirchliche Methode in der Theologie*. Bernoulli there asks whether what we ordinarily understand by systematic theology can employ the scientific method, and his answer is a decided negative. He affirms, on the contrary, that only historical theology is scientific. For scientific theology must regard its work as an end in itself. It must seek the truth only and cannot be subordinate to any churchly

interest. Historical theology has maintained such an attitude since its beginning with Hegel. That philosopher's point of view in treating religion was non-churchly; and the historical study of religion which received its original impulse from him has become more and more conscious of its non-churchly, purely scientific character down to the present time. In short, theology as a science is history. This theology should be taught in the universities.

On the other hand, Bernoulli recognizes the necessity of a churchly—or perhaps we should say a dogmatic—theology. This theology, being in the service of the church, is too much precommitted to certain conclusions to be scientific. Its task is to organize and interpret the message of the church for the purposes of general instruction and of preaching. Its origin is to be traced to Schleiermacher, as that of scientific theology is to Hegel, and it should be taught, not in the universities, but in seminaries.

This splitting of theology into two separate parts—one of which is churchly and non-scientific and the other scientific and non-churchly—has received much discussion since Bernoulli's book appeared, but into the different phases of this discussion we cannot now enter. I must confine myself to pointing out that the conception of the systematic theologian's task from the standpoint of the further development of religion leads to quite a different conclusion.

It is true that this very way of conceiving theology runs through Schleiermacher's *Kurze Darstellung des theologischen Studiums*, and that there it is definitely connected with the idea of "church guidance." But whether this involves a surrender of the scientific character of theology turns upon what is meant by the church. As has been pointed out, Schleiermacher's conception of the church is not legal and institutional but religious. It is the spiritual fellowship of believers which to him constitutes the church, and all legal and institutional features which the outward church may possess simply serve as means to the end of its higher spiritual nature.<sup>1</sup> But if this be true, the introduction of the conception of church guidance into the definition of systematic theology does not destroy

<sup>1</sup> Traub, "Kirchliche und unkirchliche Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, XIII, 40.



its claim to be a science. For no science is robbed of its essence by being placed at the service of life. The question may be raised whether Schleiermacher did not so far adapt his *Glaubenslehre* to the traditional forms of theology as to impair somewhat its scientific character, but, at all events, no such adaptation was necessitated by his conception of theology.

On the contrary, if the further development of religion itself, and of life through religion, is the ruling conception in theology, then the scientific method is directly demanded. For the question is raised at once: *What* will lead to real development? Or, in other words, what is truth in religion? This question must not be prejudged. It must be investigated on the basis of the actual facts of religion, and must be treated as objectively as the nature of the subject-matter admits. The task it presents to us, accordingly, should be recognized as a scientific one—unless, indeed, science be so defined as to be applicable only to the physical realm. The scientific character of theology is no more vitiated by its having prime reference to the development of religion than is that of medicine by aiming at health, or that of sociology if it seeks to promote social progress, while, on the other hand, such is the spirit of our time that only a scientific theology can render it any large service.

There is another reason why the conception under discussion requires that the task of the systematic theologian be regarded as a scientific one. Historical theology has already shown an enormous fruitfulness. The past development of religion is being most successfully investigated by scientific methods. The results attained, and the method by which they are attained, therefore, have most direct significance for systematic theology, if its concern is with the further development of religion. The systematic theologian, it is true, in fulfilling his task, has much else to consider besides the history of religion. The new needs of the present must be estimated. Truth from related departments of experience must be weighed. And there is the still greater task of divining modes of truth which shall forecast, for some little way, the future unfolding of religious life. But for all this work it is precisely the history of religion which furnishes a stable basis. History is the

laboratory in which spiritual truth finds its testing. And it is the science of the history of religion, together with that of the psychology of religion, which both makes possible and requires the scientific method in systematic theology.

The more common way, in recent years, of vindicating the scientific character of systematic theology, and of securing it at the same time a special field, is to define it as a normative science. Historical science deals with facts. Normative sciences deal with values. As a normative science, systematic theology would determine the great values of the Christian religion, and with these as norms would test and organize the various forms of thought and life. In this way a very sharp distinction is secured between systematic theology and the history of religion. Historical study, it is held, should not be biased by any reference to ultimate values, and theology as a normative science need not be trammelled by the inquiry how the values with which it deals first arose.

But this separation between the normative science and the historical science proves to be too sharp, both from the standpoint of the general conception of science and from that of interpreting religion.

The broadest distinction among sciences is between those which deal with mechanical, and those which deal with developing, processes; and on the basis of this division the history of religion and systematic theology alike come in the second class. But all sciences which deal with developing processes are bound to make use of norms in some fashion. This is true even in biology, where organisms are explained by their functions. It is true still more in history, which derives its significance chiefly from the values it produces. For a function or value once established immediately becomes a standard for judging future events. Accordingly, the fact that systematic theology has to do with the determination and application of norms does not separate it radically from the historical study of religion.

But more especially, if we conceive the dominant motive of systematic theology to be the further development of religion, we are by this very conception led to see that values and facts cannot be considered as belonging to entirely distinct realms. On the

contrary, the values have as their function to *remold* facts. Indeed the faith that they can do so is an essential part of religion. Did we not believe, for example, that the Christian ideals of sonship and the kingdom of God can do a reconstructive work for individual men and for society, our faith in the Christian religion would be sadly undermined. If norms and values, then, are to be tested by their power to remold facts, the science which deals with values and that which deals with facts should not be too sharply separated. Not only are the facts with which the history of religion has to do largely the emergence and working-out of values, but also the values with which systematic theology has to do are the means by which future facts are to be constituted.

Let us recall for a moment the points thus far made. Working on the basis of assured results of modern theology, we have defined the systematic theologian's task, in distinction from that of the historian or psychologist of religion, as the study of religion and Christianity with direct reference to their own further development and that of life as a whole. We have also distinguished this task from that of so-called practical theology, or any non-scientific theology, in that it requires the scientific method. We must now turn to a problem which has been with us from the beginning, but which we have deferred, because it is one with which the theological discussion of the present is most preoccupied.

### III

Thus far we have spoken of religion and Christianity in an alternative way, carrying the two conceptions along together. But now we must ask: Which is to have the priority in theology? Is Christianity to be treated as one historical phase of religion, and are its basis and interpretation to be sought through religion as a whole? Or is Christianity to be studied in practical independence of religion in general, and to be regarded as furnishing its basis and interpretation in itself? This is the issue between the Ritschlians and the modern liberal school. It finds its clearest expression in the points of contrast between Kaftan and Herrmann on the one hand, and Troeltsch on the other. On the basis of discussions which these

thinkers have carried on we may get a somewhat fuller statement of the issue itself.

Troeltsch, in partial reaction against Ritschlianism, practically converts Christian theology into the philosophy of religion. He insists that religion is a unitary phenomenon, which is to be comprehended primarily out of itself and by the historical method. Christianity is to be understood in its relation to religion in general, and the norms by which it is to be interpreted are to be sought in the processes of its historical unfolding. Hence Troeltsch criticizes the Ritschlians for isolating Christianity from other religions, or the person of Christ from other religious facts, in an arbitrary and dogmatic way. The motive which has led them to do this—the desire to present Christianity as the absolute religion—must itself be modified. Actual supremacy and sufficiency rather than theoretical absoluteness, according to Troeltsch, is what theology should seek to establish for Christianity, and this can be done by a philosophy of religion working upon the material of history. In his view, then, the task of theology is the presentation of the thought of the Christian faith on the basis of a scientific philosophy of religion.<sup>1</sup>

Kaftan, on the other hand, repudiating the criticism of Troeltsch, insists that theology can in no way be based on the philosophy of religion. The foundation for theology is solely the revelation in Jesus Christ and in the Scriptures. This position is required by the very nature of the Christian faith, which theology seeks to serve. It is of the essence of the Christian faith that in Christ, and in that which led up to him and sprang from him, should be recognized the absolute revelation of God. If theology seeks its basis in a general philosophy of religion, it becomes incapable of defending this essential Christian conviction, as Troeltsch's own conclusions show.<sup>2</sup>

Herrmann, with still greater concentration, insists that every element of Christian theology should proceed from the experience

<sup>1</sup> See "Die Selbständigkeit der Religion," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, V and VI; and the articles "Glaube und Geschichte" and "Dogmatik," *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*; also *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte*, 2. Aufl., 1912.

<sup>2</sup> See "Die Selbständigkeit des Christentums," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, VI.

which the person of Jesus Christ creates in the believing soul. In Christ we enter into relation with the absolute God. His personality furnishes our faith with a basis of indubitable fact—a fact which witnesses itself to us as divine by its unconditional appeal to that which is most authoritative in our own souls, the moral consciousness. The fundamental task of the theologian is to set forth the nature of faith in relation to Christ, and from this as a living center all interpretation of Christianity must proceed.<sup>1</sup>

Here then, standing in conscious opposition, are two contrasting conceptions of theology: namely, theology regarded as the science of the Christian faith, and theology regarded as essentially a philosophy of religion. How can we determine the relative merits of these two conceptions?

The point of view previously emphasized will help us here. Let us first take our stand within Christianity. The task of theology, as already brought out, is the scientific effort for Christianity's further development. What now is the situation? The progress of missions, and the general increase of international relations, have brought Christianity into direct interaction with other faiths. The attitude which Christianity takes to these other faiths has a decisive bearing on the question of its further development. But the points of contact and of contrast alike, between Christianity and other faiths, can be understood only as there is first a recognition of religion as an essential function of human life. A permanent spiritual triumph for Christianity can be hoped for only as it is ready to meet other faiths on this basis and to evince its superiority as religion. Hence for the very sake of aiding Christianity to meet the situation with which it is confronted and to unfold its power still further, the methods of the philosophy of religion must be used.

Or take the other aspect of Christian theology's dominant motive—the further development of moral and social life through Christianity. The capacity of our faith for promoting such development lies in the intimate relation into which it brings morality and religion. But in order that the fundamental characteristic of Christianity may be adequately understood, the place of religion as such in human experience must be shown, and the degree of relation

<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Christlich-protestantische Dogmatik," *Kultur der Gegenwart*, I, 4, 2.

or separation which religion and morality have had in the actual history of religion must be brought out, together with the consequences that have followed. But this requires that, for the very sake of an adequate understanding of Christianity's central source of power, the methods of the philosophy of religion must be employed.

It is, indeed, not the strongest side of Ritschlianism that has used the richness of the biblical revelation, and the transforming work that Christ accomplishes in the believing soul, as a basis for isolating Christianity from other religions. Revelation, and the uniqueness of Christ as Revealer and Savior are in the first instance not theological but religious ideas. To transport them bodily into theology and use them authoritatively is a bit of dogmatism. It is, moreover, a failure to preserve that subordination of theology to religion which, in general, is at the foundation of modern theology.

Ritschl himself, however, was in principle more hospitable to the approach of Christianity from the standpoint of religion in general than some of his followers have been. In his discussion of the form of systematic theology he states: "The specifically peculiar nature of Christianity, which at every turn of theology must be kept intact, can be ascertained only by calling the general history of religion to our aid. Schleiermacher was the first to adopt this method. It is this that makes his definition of religion so important."<sup>1</sup> And Ritschl also finds as a factor in every religion the problem on the basis of which he interprets Christianity as a whole, namely, that contradiction arising out of the sense that man is "both a part of nature and a spiritual personality claiming to dominate nature." Though no extensive use of this approach to Christianity through religion in general is made by Ritschl, because his main interest lies elsewhere, yet his attitude, if heeded, would have prevented the too sharp opposition of the present theological situation.

But let us place ourselves, in turn, at the standpoint of the philosophy of religion. Here again the conception previously defended will aid us. If our dominant motive here is scientific work for the sake of the further development of religion and of life through religion, our thinking cannot be guided by an a priori con-

<sup>1</sup> *Justification and Reconciliation*, III, 8.

ception of religious evolution, but must follow its actual historical unfolding. We then shall see that religion thrives only in positive, concrete, historical forms, and that these forms are not actually unified in history, but belong to certain great contrasting types. Unless development ceases, and religion stagnates, these types are bound to compete, and while one type will doubtless influence and stimulate another, it is not to be expected that all will merge into a generalized or composite form of religion, which shall be truer than any one historic form; but rather it is to be expected that the superior claim to truth will be evinced by that concrete historic type which is most virile and progressive.

Thus the philosophy of religion itself will require that in the treatment of Christianity, principles which are distinctively Christian be made controlling, and that Christianity's truest development be sought through the free expansion of its own distinctive nature. The history of Christianity will need also to be interpreted by its interaction with other religions, and its total phenomena doubtless will be found to include heterogeneous types of religion; but the motive force of the history will be sought out and set forth in its uniqueness, its vitality, and its fruitfulness.

This recognition of the distinctive character of Christianity, and of its central place in theology, is freely made by Troeltsch and the historical school. It goes back, in fact, to the beginnings of modern theology in Schleiermacher, who also approached Christianity from the standpoint of religion in general. But the present emphasis upon this uniqueness of Christianity is largely due to the Ritschlians, and the fear that it will be lost sight of may partially explain their tendency to isolate Christianity altogether.

With respect to the issue we are discussing, then, we may conclude that the special function of the Christian theologian is by the methods of the philosophy of religion to discover and interpret the essential nature of Christianity, thereby aiding in its further development and that of life as a whole.

The conception of the theologian's task already presented will require considerable recasting of theology. Simply to follow the traditional topics, God, the world, man, sin, etc., will not suffice. Instead of that, the organic unity of Christian truth must be made

to appear as fully as possible. Perhaps it will not be out of place to conclude this paper by indicating how such a result would be secured, if the view of theology here advocated were adopted.

1. If theology be directly concerned with the further development of Christianity in its relation to life, then the first question would be: What is the nature of this developing force? What is the vital impulse, the inherent energy, the creative principle in the Christian religion? In other words, the problem of the essence of Christianity, which has received its discussion for the most part outside the systems of theology, will be the fundamental problem for the theologians, upon the solution of which all the rest of his work will turn. Moreover, the treatment of this question should be based on the history of Christianity as a whole. For an aspect of Christianity which appears late is not for that reason to be judged nonessential. And while, beyond question, the stress always will fall on the beginnings of Christianity, yet, since the greatness of our faith is so largely its creativeness, we may expect that a full understanding of its essence will require that later forms be also taken into account.

2. But our conception of theology naturally leads on to a second question, namely: *How* may the further development be secured? Or more particularly, what convictions and conceptions are fundamental to Christianity, and in what form will they most promote its growth and its power to serve life? This is the problem of the truth of Christianity in its more special form—that is, the problem of the truth of Christian ideas. The problem of the truth of Christianity cannot be referred by systematic theology to some other theological discipline, or disposed of in an introduction. It must run through its whole structure, and at every point the conceptions of Christianity must be tested by their relation to its power for development.

3. Beyond these two questions lies a third: Along what lines may we expect the further development to proceed? This requires of the theologian the working-out of a theory of the Christian life. Here there should be recognition of the different types of religious experience which the psychology of religion shows to exist. Here also there should be as adequate a diagnosis as possible of the



characteristic moral and social problems of our time, so far as faith can bear upon them, in order that the theory may be shaped to meet them. But all should be under the control of what has been shown to be the essence of Christianity.

Under these three inquiries I believe the entire work of systematic theology can be comprised, with the result that its unity will be clearly evident. But at all events I hope that adequate reasons have been given for regarding the general function of theology to be: the scientific interpretation of the Christian religion with direct reference to its further development and that of life as a whole.